

a thread in the thick
rigging of night



Isaac Pickell

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Another quiet little Sunday

As the world flooded and burned, I
had myself a peaceful summer, staying in

on late lavender nights or looking out
onto Hannah's courtyard or sharing

Vincent's coffee. I spent the season waiting
for something better, so it's easy for me

to lament that nothing changed—as if
these gears can't get any tighter. I'll be

distracted through fall, grading papers
or choosing the right sweater or looking

down at the dusting snow on mums'
tightly imbricated petals. Back on campus,

when forced to find spots on the street,
I'll look around and say nothing changed

except the leaves. Winter and spring will come,
and I'll be diverted by reminders of my own

stubborn ailing future, counting out change.
Sometimes, I like to imagine all of this

is makebelieve, that we could just snap
our way into a better world, like catching

the next dream home. Othertimes, I like
to trust that if I do nothing, the worst

that can happen is more of the same, like
nothing changed. Lie to me. Tell me that's true.

At will

When you're at will, material
conditions feel illusory, wages

nothing but wounds in the debt
I collect for staying alive:

I work without a union,
so I wait for nothing

to change. Reaching for community
in the thicket of the adjunct office

means trying to capture the moments
I'm allowed to be more

than a series of figures split
by a decimal so they aren't rounded

down to nothing. When I was still
under contract, my students

asked if being
an adjunct is so bad, why

don't they just get a better job.
If you do the math, you can see

they really meant everyone
struggling, from the drive thru to

the classroom. I tell them someone has
to suffer for the rent to get paid.

I tell you this story while we sit
on the couch we call a living

room and you tell me I'll be
alright in the end. Even though

you've been out of the movement
for nine years, I know a part of you

still believes that god has got
everything to do with what we have

and what we don't, but
we've both heard the good news:

the sky is broken, so until we fix it,
we better make room down here.

Enablers

Sometimes when I get done using
the government's free lunch, I wonder

why everything I give love expects
my affection for free and all

my aversions pay me. Not enough,
but pay me. Sometimes I'll get

asked how much I make
on a book of poetry, as if

the obvious answer isn't zero,
but no one ever bothers

to question what I make
at work. Whether that is

for the sake of brevity
or embarrassment, I do not know,

but part of why that system
we need not name is so effective

is our mutual ignorance of each
other's exploitation, as we bend

to the indignity that's been hung
on public displays of poverty.

I tend to refrain from interjecting
to explain the true nature of being

an adjunct, that most college
courses are taught by people

living paycheck-to-paycheck;
I stay in my lane. Whether that is

for the sake of brevity
or shame,

I do not know.

Hopeful poem

Beaten down by the reliability of suffering
for all things great and small,

I try to drown my despair in minutiae:
I capitulate to this sore

tooth and my commute and one of those human-
interest stories where a band-aid is stuck

onto a broken system, harms smoothed over
by the human kindness of a single estate.

This time it's a man who walked
uphill to the same job every day until

his boss' boss' boss bought him
a used car. In return, these surrenders

give me Advil, patience, and a sprinkle of hope:
if we just got more estates on our side, maybe

we could harness their power to see a problem
and make it go away, *poof*—how many poofs

could it possibly take to make the world
a better place, to end this country's ills

or to end this ill country? Of course,
it's this country that made wealth

the only magic in the first place, so it's folly
to ever expect the wealthy to see the rest of us

in the mirror. But we can't let fools
and rich people be the only ones who think

things can change—this is a hopeful poem!
This is a hopeful poem, where time is

on our side because there's nowhere else
it'd rather be, where power is always

in numbers, where, beaten down, I can
still choose to believe in our ability

to believe, even as I am forced to give up
on enchantment all over again.

I sign a petition, I shake a hand,

and a union waits
a little longer to get
busted: it's always raining
here, but the bosses are

on a losing streak;
I feel hope for a moment
that's coming but hasn't
arrived. I read

azure in a poem
and write down
every word I know
for blue until the ink

bleeds because, like I said,
it's raining. I forget
the shape of my hand-
writing. I keep

trying to make lists
of good things that happen

to bad people because
I want my share of
the future: I no longer
want to die or be defined

by them; I know
we're going to win, and I hope
to be part of that first-
person plural. Like I said,

it's raining—heavy
symbolism, like how
sometimes even dead things
have open eyes: the mighty

will rent the ground
from under us, then
tell us how to behave
on private property.

We don't have to listen.
Their eyes don't see.

The unemployment rate is at an all-time low

*We need to see pain in the economy. We need to remind people
that they work for the employer, not the other way round.*

—Tim Gurner

1.

For anyone who grew up without the taste of money,
A new job can tripwire a spark at your core, this feeling
Like anything is possible, like all it took was a little grit
And natural-born gifts to make it. Even as I know

This life is a synthetic zero-sum game where my gain
Is infinitely tethered to a thousand million screams,
Every time I'm hired into some new manifestation
Of the same job I've worked since before I knew how

To love, I swell with the sunny ache of pride and a belief
In everything, if only for the moment a crisp bill slaps
My hand as I cash the check, remembering what it means
For someone to owe me instead of the other way around.

2.

These deluded flashes are easy to get used to, a drug,
A temporary remedy for everything that's ever been done
To you, a vacant reminder that if you work hard enough,
Good things will come; liberals are just well-intentioned

Addicts who never bothered to question the price of their luck.
Of course, in our hearts we know that even at our peak
Each of us alone is nothing but a wilting example of
American meritocracy, marionetted and dangling but still

With our feet off the floor, freed from the full impact of
A system built on the threat of gravity. When things go poorly
For an individual, we droop but don't drop, and they want us
To say thank you for the privilege of having someone else

To look down on. Working at Wendy's eighteen months after
Dropping out of college, I stayed grateful I didn't have to take
The night shift, that I got the raise Jones never saw, that my skin
Corrected the mistake of my circumstance. This balance is

Carefully curated, deploying ruin in measured portions, adequate
To keep those of us strung up grateful for the weightlessness and
The numbers of the fallen thin enough so there can be no way
To build a human ladder like a carnival act fighting for its life,

3.

But they fucked up this time:

the unemployment rate is at an all-time low, and
with so few of us left on the ground, we can stop
worrying about the fall and start looking around

To notice the strings and the fat, fat, hands that hold them:

From Detroit to Hollywood to Morgantown,

this is the time to strike.

I have a job, or three of them, and admit I still feel those stings of

Pride, the vanity of believing I worked hard to earn this good-
Enough life. But strike we must, for the simple, exacting price
Of progress without lasting change is that before we can finish
Climbing the strings, they will feel our rise and cut us down.

What is is what must be

A lot of ideas make impossible sounds when they come
out of a mouth. You grow used to hearing ideas
that way, imaginative but unworkable, their pitch

skewed by buffers like *that's just the way things are* and
other masking noises meant to mimic surrender, devised
so you believe ideas will never come true no matter

how true they are, never to be measured by the work
that goes into giving them shape. Those buffers are big
business, keeping ideas ideas and things things, and

they are designed to be contagious as any yawn

*Idea: if we split every penny between all eight
billion of us, we could each have one million two
hundred and sixty-two thousand pennies a year.*

*Thing: you are weary, vacant, you know nothing about
logistics, when you walk you walk nowhere and when you run
you fall, so if you want to keep up you better just stay in place.*

The most potent lies

Six thousand two hundred and forty dollars flutter
east from Washington to Tel Aviv every minute.

A child dies in Gaza every six hundred and
eighty-two seconds. If you do the math, you see

it costs a lot to kill a child. They expect us to eat
the check for the sake of liberty. The most potent lies

settle in your gut, fixed to doubt you already harbored:
what use is history against the power of history books.

We pretend every death is created equal, even as
some deaths spell pity and others write paychecks,

over fourteen billion more for your favorite defense
contractors. The lynchpin lie of it all is that this situation

is complicated: it's never paid to fight for freedom, so
follow the money to know what side you're on.

But if I post about Gaza, I may lose my job

Time is a manufactured quality that glints
All the way to market, an attribute to dye
Our lives in shades of currency, sparkling
Silver & gleaming gold, obscuring the base

Metals we accept in trade for the occasion
Of our industry; yes, we tell ourselves stories
In order to stay employed, like we are composed
Of discrete bits, fragments of resolve & not

A field of existence that's always already
Finished & beginning again, like *silence* is
A natural quality that glints with iridescent
Virtue, reflecting an effervescent genius & not

A hostile relationship to change, a trestle to hold
The other as suspect until time proves them
Guilty. The mouth stays shut so everybody knows
Your courage collapses with the rest of the rubble.

The master's china

At the all-campus Professional Development Day, we are sold
DEI on a porcelain platter that is threatening

to shatter at the slightest touch, a thousand little cracks
already visible on its whiter-than-ivory surface, each

emblazoned with a proposed solution littered with words
like *listening* and *learning* and *living document* and not

a single one with the word *money*. Everyone handles the saucer
with great care, passing it around conference tables

and holding it with both hands, which leaves no one
with a free limb to poke at the DEI laying at the center.

Everyone marvels at the platter. Fingers its scalloped edges.
Meanwhile, inspired, an administrator adorns her email signature

with an Audre Lorde quote, something about new ideas,
or something about fire, as if the answer could be easy

as words you're still too afraid to speak. The slab of DEI
just lays there, going crusty in the dry breeze of the air conditioning.

By a decision of six to three

for Thurgood Marshall

I learn affirmative action dies
in a coffee shop in the north

of Virginia, as likely a place
for disappointment as any other

as the law unravels its pale
attempt at equity. The word

Diversity: a threadbare shift,
clapboard thin, that never sought

reparation but only to make life
more colorful, promising subsidy

for those already underwritten by
history. Diversity, as if change

was only profitable when it grasped
it could realize white people

at the center of
another narrative. What is left

Ø

of the outside: [whiteness]
is a tale

traipsing over flagrant
and curled bodies

and refusing to own
its own stomp; [whiteness]

is the maintenance
of innocence; [whiteness]

is the tender of tenderness,
is the sovereign

this idea of race functions to
privilege. The law deflates:

the strange career of [whiteness],
where not every ill is a hangover

from slavery, where the present
does enough on its own.

Ø

We are sold, root and branch,
a story of legitimacy, telling ourselves

we move forward because where else
would the arc of history bend;

Is the movement a guarantee
the world will bow?

Ø

Instead of righting
historical wrongs, in 1978

the Supreme Court chose
to keep its focus on

Diversity, as if [whiteness]

was a heart meant
to curate bones;

Thurgood knew where
this was going, and

by a decision of six to three
the center is finally free. Some-

Ø

times it is so hard to reach
back into history, but [whiteness]

has always been free.

A project to inhabit all time

In the beginning all the world was America

—John Locke

It all began involuntarily: a ship,
a shore, a ship, a shackle, a ship,

a ship, a ship, a ship, a ship—
what made this country. It's soothing

to imagine we are an experiment
forever chasing the theory

of its founding, like there is a finish line,
like we're the first of our kind,

this settler empire drawing bodies
as grist from disparate coasts,

committed to being continually
surprised by the results. Our future is

an endeavor of maintaining
innocence in the face of premediated

slaughter, evolving [once we ran
through the continent, we began

outsourcing] violence past the bleeding
gums of the enslaved to the clean

crimes of someone else's iron, as if
what we are is always waiting to be

uncovered. But this has happened
before: the strange career of whiteness

by every other name swept landscapes
under the rug of virtue and the bodies

rolled up inside it; *in the beginning*
all the new world was new, waiting

to be soiled by anyone
who could claim to be

the first to find it and forget
the sound of billowing horizons

and remember only the ship,
the ship, the ship, the ship,

‘dɪʃɪps əʃɪp ‘dɪʃɪps əʃɪp ‘dɪʃɪps əʃɪp
the ship, the ship, the ship,

‘dɪʃɪps əʃɪp ‘dɪʃɪps əʃɪp ‘dɪʃɪps əʃɪp
the ship, the ship, the ship,

The thing is, we can't fade our way
into innocence, can't make sense

without black words. Beginning or ending,
the whole world was never America.

I can't keep us out of my mouth

The future of the planet is too big for me:
I've tried to cradle it in my palms, tie it

around my little finger, let it drape
like a shawl about my shoulders; I've tried

to give it water, light, and the respite of
shade, tried to bury it because that one poem

said it would grow like a seed; I've tried
to feed it from my empty breast, let it borrow

the sparkle of my eye. But for everything
I offer, it keeps slipping and stunting and

failing in my hands, turning to powder—
but dust, not fertile ash or warm sand.

No matter what I try to say, I have to play
pretend to imagine an earth where the crocus

doesn't just wilt once it leaves the page or
the rent doesn't get paid or things don't fade.

That's the planet we got, one where you have to
ask the dumbest questions to stay alive: why

do they want a world of dying skin
when even their own is on the line?

When it starts to feel like words are nothing
but empty promises, I can't seem to help

but invoke the first-person plural, because *we*
seems like the only option when standing up

to a *them*, like our necks stay under heels and even
as mine might break, together there's enough

tendons to bend. You know it, don't you: we survive
until the end of the poem where you alone

would never make it. This is not
a hopeful poem. I don't know

how to make anything from these lemons.
I wish I knew how // we survive.

Synesthesia

On our planet of calamity, where even tragedy waits
to be unremembered in favor of some newer tragedy,

it's weirdly soothing to survive over and over—despite
best efforts, the world fails to break us. I say: take pride

in growing hard or elastic, dodging the brittleness
that can come with patience. You ask me: but have you ever

tried being soft, being broken by each loss, each setback,
unscrewing your chest, fumbling thumbs over a pain

you are never able to cover. Soft and nerve, soft and certain.
You mean to ask also about *us*, how I keep being too distracted

to remember you are why I care about all that calamity
in the first place. But still, my voice catches on the thing

you're supposed to say back when you love someone,
the obvious thing that I'm never saying enough, and so

you want me to try finding it in another sense, to roll
an unshelled walnut back and forth between my fingers,

feel the surprising roughness of its bright green shell
that looks so soft, dimpled as it is, roll until its bright green smell

blankets my hands, and when I bring my nose close enough,
the deep earthy traces rise through my sinuses until I can taste them.

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